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BLACK BEAR



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

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The Newsletter of Region One

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FOCUS ON BLACK BEARS

—Region One convenes Black Bear Committee to recommend management steps—

Black bears in northwest Montana are a terrific resource, but are in need of an innovative management plan to guard against a drop in their population. That's the conclusion reached by Region One Wildlife Manager Harvey Nyberg, who has convened a citizen-based committee to tackle the issue.

"We've established the committee to come up with black bear management strategies which will meet two needs," Nyberg says. "We must provide good hunting opportunities, while at the same time maintain a healthy bear population now and into the future."

In convening the committee, Nyberg looked to black bear hunters from across northwest Montana, outfitters, taxidermists, citizen advisor representatives, and FWP biologists.

The representatives include: Bruce Babcock, Dave Britton, Arlie Burk, Scott Lennard, Gerry Mercer, Cecil Noble, Dale Williams; and Jerry Brown and Nyberg from FWP.

Over the next year, the committee will examine the black bear population statistics and hunting information assembled by FWP biologists over the past decade, and discuss management needs and options. They will focus on

the trend of increasing harvest of young bears. The committee will hear from independent scientists, identify problems and propose solutions. They will look at options for better regulations, hunter access, and public education.

"We're looking for grassroots management advice by representatives of major groups interested in bear hunting," says Nyberg.

—Biologists say black bear harvest statistics raise red flags—

Over the past 11 years, FWP has checked 5,605 black bears harvested by hunters in northwest Montana. Wildlife Biologist Jerry Brown and others have analyzed information from these checks and have found that:

- 65 percent of the harvested bears were males; 35 percent were females;

- Young bears (less than 5 years of age) made up 59 percent, adult males 24 percent, and adult females 17 percent of the harvest;

- The median age of females harvested was 4 years; the median age for males was 3 years;

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BLACK BEARS are a popular but controversial big game species in northwest Montana. Hunters report a harvest of about 500 per year, but recent declines in median bear age have biologists concerned.

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—Biologists say black bear harvest statistics raise red flags—

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- The oldest male bear was 31 years old; the oldest female bear was 29 years old;

- Two-thirds of the bears taken were black in coat color, one-third were brown or blond;

- The average weight for bears harvested in spring is 205 pounds (males) and 119 pounds (females); in fall, bears average 253 pounds (males) and 181 pounds (females).

According to black bear expert Jerry Brown, these figures are a mix of good and bad news for the bear population. Brown points out that guidelines established in the state black bear plan

call for less than 40 percent of the harvest to be female. Only 35 percent of the harvest has been female, so that standard is being met.

But the same plan calls for a median age of harvested bears of 6 years (females) and 4 years (males); the median age of bears harvested in northwest Montana has been only 4 years (females) and 3 years (males).

Brown calls these statistics a red flag. "It's not the end of the world," he says, "but there's some things going on with the bear population we need to be concerned about." Brown points out that young bears make up more than half the harvest, and the proportion of

adult male bears is declining. Brown says that adult male bears are usually the most vulnerable, because they travel farthest and are more aggressive. He is concerned that fewer adult male black bears are showing up in the harvest.

Black bears in Montana take longer to reach maturity than bears in the eastern or southern U. S. Female bears first breed at 6 years of age, so it takes 12 years for a female bear to replace herself in the population. "If we're not getting enough female bears into that 6-year-old group, we have a problem," Brown says. 

Region One Black Bear Harvest Statistics

Year	Bears* Checked	Bears Aged	Female	Male	Adult Male	Adult Female	Sub Adults	Median Age Female	Male	Total
1985	583	577	228 (39)*	355 (61)	119 (21)	96 (17)	362 (62)	4.0	3.0	4.0
1986	585	577	224 (38)	361 (62)	153 (27)	128 (22)	296 (51)	5.0	4.0	4.0
1987	458	454	163 (36)	295 (64)	139 (31)	102 (22)	213 (47)	6.0	4.0	5.0
1988	365	360	126 (34)	239 (66)	119 (33)	68 (19)	173 (48)	5.0	4.5	5.0
1989	552	543	201 (37)	347 (63)	120 (22)	108 (20)	315 (58)	5.0	3.0	3.0
1990	561	553	221 (40)	338 (60)	147 (27)	118 (21)	288 (52)	5.0	4.0	4.0
1991	382	374	132 (35)	250 (65)	96 (26)	57 (15)	221 (59)	3.0	3.0	3.0
1992	674	669	226 (34)	447 (66)	103 (15)	83 (12)	483 (73)	4.0	2.0	3.0
1993	465	461	140 (30)	325 (70)	124 (27)	60 (13)	277 (60)	4.0	3.0	3.0
1994	441	432	117 (27)	324 (73)	108 (25)	40 (09)	284 (66)	3.0	3.0	3.0
1995	539	524	199 (37)	340 (63)	114 (22)	75 (14)	335 (64)	4.0	4.0	4.0
Total	5,605	5,524	1,977 (35)	3,621 (65)	1,342 (24)	935 (17)	3,247 (59)			
Annual Average	510	502	180 (35)	329 (65)	122 (24)	85 (17)	295 (59)	4.0	3.0	4.0

* Numbers in parenthesis are percent of annual harvest.

* Not all information was available for each animal.

—Black bear workshop focuses on hunting history, hunting, hide care techniques, ethics—

The North American bear hunting ethic blends the strength of historical truths and the power of myth, says Orion the Hunters Institute Director Jim Posewitz. Posewitz delivered a talk, "Bear Hunting Ethics, Mythology, and the North American Hunter," to 25 bear hunters at a bear hunting workshop sponsored by FWP on September 10.

Posewitz led the audience through the history of human/bear relationships in North America from the earliest hunters who crossed the Bering ice

bridge, to the period leading up to European settlement and westward expansion, to modern bear hunters.

To establish the ethical foundation for bear hunting into the 21st Century, Posewitz says we must recognize, appreciate, and understand three principles: the origin of our right to be hunters; the events that brought us the opportunity to hunt; and building an appreciation for the animals we hunt.

In Europe, Posewitz pointed out, wildlife belonged to the landed gentry.

By contrast, in North America wildlife belongs to the people.

Says Posewitz, "Theodore Roosevelt spoke for all of us. He was determined to conserve wildlife for all the people." Posewitz pointed out that Roosevelt was a man of means and could very well have achieved privileged hunting on his land holdings and other private land. Instead, he chose to fight for wildlife conservation and hunting to benefit all the people in the U. S.

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—Black bear workshop focuses on hunting history, hunting, hide care techniques, ethics—

(Cont. from Page 2)

Posewitz pointed out that Roosevelt once said, "The wealthy man can get hunting anyhow, but the man of small means is dependent solely upon wise and well-executed game laws...."

To maintain bear hunting traditions, hunters must continue to develop a respect and reverence for the bear, Posewitz said. He linked the powerful relationship between bears and aboriginal people and extended the concept to modern hunting.

Following Posewitz, taxidermist Bruce Babcock passed along black bear hunting tips, including: "To find bears, you have to go to their dinner places." Babcock went on to describe the best places to find bears in the spring (green-up areas) and fall (berry patches, shrub fields).

Babcock said that to avoid selecting a small bear, hunters should look for three things characteristic of young black bears: ears overwhelm the head; head looks large compared to the body; lots of space between the bear's belly and the ground. Avoid harvesting these bears, says Babcock.

The size of black bears is hard to judge, Babcock says. "Bears suffer an amazing ground shrinkage," he joked. "Often, hunters kill bears that they think will measure 7 feet, but the hides shrink to 5 feet when they're skinned and measured." He added that of the 120 bears he's handled recently, only nine measured 6-feet or greater.



Babcock also advised hunters to watch the bear closely and be sure that: it is not a grizzly, does not have cubs, and has an unrubbed pelt. Finally, he explained that hunters must properly skin a bear if they plan to have a good quality pelt. He recommended a five step procedure for proper skinning.

Biologist Jerry Brown spoke to the group and relayed the information he gleaned from the analysis of harvested bears. Wildlife Manager Harvey

P R E S E N T E R S :
Harvey Nyberg, Jerry Brown, Jim Posewitz and Bruce Babcock were the principle speakers at the Region One Black Bear Workshop held Sept. 10. About 25 bear hunters listened to information on hunting history, biology, and hunting techniques.

Nyberg was the last speaker; he discussed management issues and the black bear management committee. Many members of the audience stayed after the workshop and talked individually with the presenters.

Anyone interested in more detail on the workshop can contact FWP for copies of presentations; also, FWP is looking for suggested topics for future hunter responsibility workshops.



Skinning a Bear

1. Make belly incision from anus straight up belly and neck. Stop cut 4" from front lip. **Make sure you are exactly on center.**
2. Pull front leg out. Cut from center of pad to elbow, then swing knife and cut to breast bone. **Do not cut into armpit area.**
3. Pull back leg out. Cut from center

of pad to knee joint, then swing knife inside and cut about 5 to 6 inches in front of anus.

4. Cut tendons at wrist and leave foot in pelt. Cut skull at last neck joint. Leave unskinned if weather permits.
5. Take immediately to your taxidermist or freeze solid. **Bears spoil rapidly.**

Community Pitches In for Hunter Education

Flathead Valley businesses have made it possible for volunteers to complete a new storage building for Hunter Education field course supplies. Kalispell area Hunter Education Instructors built the 8-by-12-foot unit to store deer silhouettes, hunting vests, field course materials, signs and other supplies. Now, instructors will not have to transport supplies back and forth from town.

The field course is located at the Flathead Valley Clay Target Club and

Northwest Montana Arms Collectors facility north of Kalispell. The facility has hosted the spring and fall Hunter Education field courses for four years.

Valley businesses donating to the building effort include: Try City Lumber; Lillenthal and Schuman Insulation; Western Building Center; Wrights Kalispell Lumber; Sliter's Ace Lumber and Building Supply of Somers; Plum Creek, Evergreen; Anderson Masonry; Roger Jones.

Hunter Education Instructors

serve as unpaid volunteers, and a good share of the program is supported by community efforts like this one. The success of the program shows the value people place on hunting traditions in the valley.

If you love the tradition of hunting and want to pass it on, consider becoming a Hunter Education Instructor. More instructors are needed throughout northwest Montana. Contact your local instructor or FWP for information.



Access Trail Completed at Bailey Lake

A connecting access trail designed for people with moderate disabilities (cane users, for example) has been completed at Bailey Lake, located seven miles north of Columbia Falls. Members of the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Crossing the Barriers Committee and the U. S. Forest Service worked on the trail which now makes the lake more accessible for disabled folks and families with small children.

The short trail follows a very mild grade through a stand of trees and

connects with the main trail to the lake. Formerly, people had to negotiate a steep, rocky pitch to reach the main trail. Signs have been installed to identify the access, which is owned by the Forest Service, and the new trailhead.

Another aspect of the Bailey Lake project involves cleaning up a serious litter problem. Members of Cub Scout Pack 44 of Kalispell have been picking up trash periodically throughout the summer. The site now looks much better.



WORK CREW: Members of the Crossing the Barriers Committee and U. S. Forest Service complete the new access trail at Bailey Lake.

Pack leader Jennifer Corbin says that the boys are enjoying doing something positive for the community. They also take the opportunity to do some fishing when they finish their work.

The lake, located just off the North Fork Road, has been a convenient site for fishing and swimming for valley residents. Fisheries Manager Jim Vashro is looking at options to improve the lake's fisheries. Yearly plants of cutthroat trout have not produced a strong fishery. ☺

FWP COMMISSIONER Charlie Decker of Libby addresses a gathering of Hunter Education Instructors at the Region One summer instructors' workshop held each year in August.

Decker and the other members of the Commission received the 1996 Commission of the Year Award from the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

Other FWP Commission members include: Stan Meyer (chairman), Dave Simpson (vice chairman), Darlyne Dascher, and Dale Tash.



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